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ABSTRACT

A study was undertaken to identify cultural, linguistic, and family factors affecting the academic performance of four Chinese students in the United States. Subjects were eighth-grade students who had come to the United States 3 to 5 years earlier, all native Mandarian speakers and all enrolled in a public school bilingual program where they had the lowest performance in their class. Data were gathered through classroom observation during one semester, analysis of academic performance, and parent and student interviews. Analysis of the data indicates that (1) English language skills, or lack of them, were a major factor in learning and achievement, and language attitudes were also important in some cases, and (2) close protection of Chinese language, culture, and community and lack of parental involvement in education and support for acculturation prevented students from achieving optimally. It is recommended that use of English as a medium of instruction be gradually increased, and that bilingual students be actively encouraged to participate in classroom and extracurricular activities fostering language learning. (MSE)



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Four Chinese Junior High School "Unsuccessful" Students: Language, Cultural, And Family Factors

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In 1994 the United States Census Bureau reported 8.9 million Asian Americans living in the United States, an increase of 5.1 million from 1980. By the end of the century, the number of Asian Americans was predicted to reach 11 million, nearly 4% of the total population of the United States (U.S. Department of Commerce, Economics, and Statistics Administration, 1995).

Immigrants from China comprise a major subcategory of Asian In fact, Americans of Chinese ancestry, together with more recent immigrants from China, accounted for 21% of all Asian Americans in 1985. Chinese Americans numbered more than 2.4 million in the 1993 census, making them the largest subcategory of Asian Americans (Gardner, Robey, & Smith, 1989; U.S. Department of Commerce, Economics, and Statistics Administration, 1995).

Due to the rapid influx of Asian immigrants into the United States in the 1980s and 1990s, much attention has been given to the academic success of Asian-American students. The academic achievement of Asian-American students has drawn great attention to the instructional techniques which predate their immigration. Most Asian cultures place a heavy emphasis upon education. is particularly true in Chinese culture. The Chinese believe that intensive study `shines the faces of one's ancestors.'

Values retained from prior cultures constitute a source of motivation and direction for families as they cope with the contemporary problems of assimilation into the American society. Asian-American children often accept that academic success is tied to family honor.

Stereotypes portraying the success of Asian-American students have been reinforced in the media and the population at large. Feng (1994) indicated that Asian-American students are generally stereotyped as a successful, law-abiding, and high-achieving minority. The Asian stereotype of the problem-fee whiz kid' has been portrayed in so many books, newspapers, and movies that Asians have become labeled a "model minority" (Feng, 1994).

The academic performance of Asian Americans has aroused a reassessment of the prevailing American perspective on education, and prevailing opinions about the cultural, sociopsychological, and parental factors involved in educational performance have all come to be reexamined. According to Chuong (1989), O'Hare and Felt (1991), and Peng (1995) new Asian immigrants fell into two distinct groups. The first group is comprised of well-educated professionals who have little or no problem moving into the American mainstream. The other group lacks the education and language skills which would enable them to move out of the laboring classes. This polarization also divides the children of the Asian American community into two different worlds.

There are a significant number of studies on the academic



performance of successful Asian students. However, few studies have researched the constituent elements of this academic success. Asian-American students have a strong reputation for high educational achievement. Their success on standardized tests as well as on college campuses around the country has been the subject of media attention (Brand, 1987; Caplan, Choy, & Whitmore, 1992; Fischer, 1988; The National Education Goals Panel, 1994). In The Learning Gap (1992), Stevenson and Stigler compared American elementary schools to elementary schools in China, Japan, and Taiwan on their academic performances. Stevenson and Stigler (1992) stated reasons why students enrolled in schools in Japan and China do better than those in the United States. Reasons given indicate that Chinese and Japanese students work harder, and longer, and their teachers spend a lot of time creating questions that will best rouse the desired sequence of responses from students. The general conclusion is that Asian students do well in American schools. They are a "model minority. Brand (1987) reported that the "model minority" image of Asian Americans is used as a political tool to short-change the educational requirements of a significant percentage of non-English speaking students in the United States. As a matter of fact, new immigrants, especially Indo-Chinese refugees, immigrants from China rural areas arrive academically ill-equipped. Brand (1987) reported that the children of Indo-Chinese refugees struggle with the language barrier, suffer a severe form of culture shock, and often drop out of school. He



also argued that the majority of Asian-American students do not reach the starry heights of the celebrated few, and an alarming number are pushing themselves to the emotional brink in their quest for excellence.

Researchers have pointed out that Asian-American students came from more than 30 different countries, some of these ethnic subgroups, such as refugees from Southeast Asia, Pacific Islanders, do not do well academically as other subgroups (Chuong, 1989; Peng, 1995).

Asian Americans are composed of many subgroups with different background of language, cultural heritage, educational levels, and economic social status. For example, Indo-Chinese refugees, Thai, and Pacific Islanders including Guamanian, Samoan are badly in need of educational help (Brand, 1987; Peng, 1995). Chuong (1989) categorized Southeast Asian refugees into three refugee waves: the children of the first wave, (refugees who came in 1975) the second wave, (refugees who began to come in 1979) and the third wave (who came in 1982). He (Chuong) pointed out that the majority of the first wave refugees were young. This immigrants came with education and skills. The second wave began in 1979, about 40% of the second wave refugees were ethnic Chinese. The second wave also brought in a large number of refugees from Cambodia and Laos, who had different linguistic and cultural backgrounds (Chuong, 1989). The refugees of the second wave were composed of a large number of adolescents who had been moved from one place to another during the war, and had to stop



schooling against their wills. Chuong (1989) reported that in this particular group some had trouble coping with the extreme changes in their life. Many had run into trouble with school authorities and law enforcement agencies. The third wave of Southeast Asian refugees had been sponsored by their relatives who were the part of the first or the second wave of refugees. From 1982 on, these new-comers were considered regular immigrants. The children of the third wave arrived in the United States with different educational backgrounds and economical status. Some of the children were highly motivated city-dwellers and some were the children of farmers who had spent most of their lives working in rice fields. The later mentioned kids faced several educational changes even before they came to the United States, furthermore, they lived in refugee camps for one to two years without formal education (Chuong, 1989).

The lack of English language skills is a contributing factor in the low academic performance of some Chinese Asian students. For example, Schneider and Lee (1990) rationalized that the lack of language skills among Asian students was directly related to the inability of immigrant parents to reinforce English at home. In the year 1984, Asian students had the lowest average score on the SAT verbal test, 373, almost 140 points lower than the average score for white students (Escueta & O'Brien, 1991). Escueta and O'Brien (1991) attributed the lower scores to English being a second language for the majority of Asian students who took the examination. Rong and Preissle-Goetz (1990) also



pointed out that the foreign-born Asians who came to the United States at an older age, who only spoke their native language during childhood, or at home, and speak poor English, have a higher dropout rate than children who are not in those categories.

On the whole, Asian Americans have the lowest high school dropout rate of any ethnic group, but there is a growing sign that dropout rates of Southeast Asian refugee students are increasing. Rong and Preissle-Goetz (1990) reported that being married at an early age was strongly related to the dropout problem for immigrant youths for Asian as well as Hispanic children. They found that the relationship is particularly strong for the foreign-born Asians. The combination of English difficulties, family language background, marital status, and possibility of socioeconomic background are all likely to influence the educational performance of the foreign-born Asians. Rong and Preissle-Goetz (1990) reported that the drop-out problem of Asian immigrant youth has not drawn attention among educators, media, policy makers, because of the lower rates, compared with other groups. Many Asian immigrant youth from non-English speaking background with low socioeconomic families had been retained in school and dropped out because their language needs were not met. Why do some Chinese youngsters succeed while others do not perform well in school? Do language, culture, and family factors influence Chinese students' success in school? These are relevant questions asked by many educators in the 1990s



and are the focus of this study.

The purpose of this study was to determine how cultural, linguistic, and family factors influence the academic performance of Chinese students in the United States. The population for this study were 4 junior high school recent immigrant Chinese students attending a public school in New York City. These students were classified as "unsuccessful" students (possessing average of 70 percent below in reading, language arts, and math). Due to the low English proficiency level of the whole class, students were instructed in their native language and received English instruction as a second language. Components considered in this study were the cultural, linguistic, and home environments of immigrant Chinese students, and its relationship with students' academic achievement.

The Problem

The purpose of this study was to identify the cultural, linguistic, and family factors that influence the academic performance of four Chinese students in the United States. The study utilized students' educational performance, classroom observations, as well as student and parent interviews to identify factors influencing academic success or the lack thereof using a case study approach. In this study, "unsuccessful" students were defined as possessing an overall percentage of 70 below on academic tests (Math, Social Studies, Science, English as a Second Language, and Chinese language). The subjects for



this study were four eight grade students who came to this country 3 to 5 years ago. All students were native Chinese who spoke Mandarin as their first language, who were enrolled in a bilingual class in a public school in New York City. This study focused on the following research questions: (a) How does the linguistic environment influence Chinese students' academic performance? (b) How does the Chinese culture impact on students' academic performance? (c) How does the family factor influence Chinese students' academic performance? (d) Is there a relationship between Chinese parents' emphasis on education and students' academic performance?

The data for this study were collected during one semester of observations in the classroom, analysis of academic data, and interviews. Interviews with students were conducted in classroom settings, with teacher's present, to minimize the variable of uneasy and emotional discomfort. Parents were interviewed over the phone and in their homes. Additionally, parents were interviewed after their children were interviewed, both for purposes of uniformity of data collection, and to further minimize the anomalous influence of disrupting lives and households.

The study was conducted during the Fall semester 1992 at a junior high school in New York City. The four subjects were chosen according to the maintenance of minimum percentile scores of their academic school records. The four "unsuccessful" students represent the lowest students within the 28 students in



the class.

Multiple sources of evidence were used in this case study and helped the investigator address a broader range of historical, attitudinal, and observational issues. Students' interviews, students' essays, the questionnaire, and students' academic records were used in analyzing each of the four subjects. The interviews with students and parents conducted in Chinese or English were a primary instrument in this study. The students were asked to write brief essays in English or Chinese explaining why they thought they were not getting better grades in school. The students' interview consisted of 15 questions divided into three categories: (a) language factors, (b) cultural factors, and family factors. The questionnaire entitled Knowing More About You was given in English or Chinese, and was divided into three parts: (a) language factor, (b) cultural factor, and © family factor with 10 open-ended questions.

The data were collected during one semester of observations in classrooms, homes, and through interviews. The interviews with students were conducted in classroom settings. Parents were visited and interviewed in their homes at times that were convenient to them. The data were divided into three categories, and for each category there was a summary based on the language factor, cultural factor, and family factor. In this study, the emphasis was on how these factors related to the achievement of Chinese students in the United States. The same form and categories were used for the parents' interviews as well, but



with different questions. The students' academic records were used in this study to help the investigator cross reference the interviews, essays, and questionnaires.

Findings

The analysis of findings of the study are discussed into three main categories: language, cultural, and family factors.

Language Factors

How does the linguistic environment influence Chinese students' academic performance? Each student in this study was born into a Chinese language society. English was their second language, and each of these students had never had any formal English language instruction before coming to the United States. Each parent had grown up in a Chinese language society, and had lived in the United States for a short period of time (3 to 5 years). Since parents demonstrated a low level of English language skills, the anomalous impact of direct parental instruction could be marginalized; mom and dad simply did not possess the necessary skills to help students write the essays, or do the English homework. Parents of all four students stated that English skill affected their children's studies in school. They said that their children were not born in the United States, English was their second language, and they were new immigrants who had not learned English before they came to the United States, and that the lack of English skills slowed down their academic performance in school. All four students' parents



stated that English language skills have a major impact on their children's academic performance. They said that their children were not born in the United States; English was their second language and because of English language problems, they had to receive most of their instructions in the bilingual classes.

The language environment at school for these students was limited. The instruction of the school, in which the four students were enrolled, was almost exclusively conducted in Chinese. They did not have much opportunities for practicing the English language at school. English language environment became a crucial element towards academic success of Chinese students. The lack of instruction in the English language influenced their academic performance. All four students spoke Chinese at home, because their family members spoke Chinese and it was easy for them to communicate. Two students claimed that they thought in Chinese and translated their ideas into English. They all stated that English is useful and important to them, because they are in the United States and English is the main language. They all felt that if they could not speak English, they could not get a good education and be able to find good jobs in the future.

Based on the above findings, the authors conclude that English language skill was one of the main problems for these four students' academic performance. The lack of English language skills did influence their school learning and performance.

Cultural Factors.

How does the Chinese culture impact on students' academic



performance? When the students were asked that if their parents went to school to meet their teachers, the answers were that their parents were so busy that they could not go to school to see their teachers. When the parents were asked whether the American children's attitude towards their parents and teachers bothered them, the four parents' answers were the same. were all bothered by the way American children talked to their parents and their teachers. They claimed that the American children do not respect their parents and teachers, and that they can never get used to that kind of behavior. One of the students' father stated that there is a world of difference between the schools in the United States and those in their country. He said that schools in the United States have too many holidays and free time. Vacations are too long and the homework is too little. The curriculum is not systematic; for example, the basic skill emphasized in mathematics was not down to earth.

The four students reported that culture and tradition were just so much more fodder to add to their burden of study.

Essays, interviews, and questionnaires revealed that the "unsuccessful" students spent a little time doing their homework, reading English language literature, and doing other tasks related to their studies. They spent a lot of times on playing video games and watching TV. The above data suggest that cultural factors had an impact upon all four Chinese students. Chinese culture provided a canon of norms from which to rebel. These four students felt that their native culture and tradition



added more burden to their ability to study and perform well in American schools.

Family Factors.

How does the family factor influence Chinese students' academic performance? All four students all said that education is very important. When they were asked if their parents asked them about their homework, all of the students said that their parents asked about their homework, but their parents worked hard and late and did not have time to check on their homework. They claimed that if they had a problem with their studies, their parents could not help them because their parents did not understand the task. One of the students wrote in his essay that he did not like to stay home to do homework because it was not fun. He said he did not come home until bedtime. His mother said they were worried about his school work, but she could not give any help, because she did not know English and did not have much education either. His father works hard and late and could not be there with him when he needed help.

Statements and essays indicated that there is a strong correlation between the time and quality of attention invested by parents(s) and the corresponding academic performance of their children. Every parent cared about academic performance and expected high marks as well as the mastery of English language skills. However, a key component between the expectation and reality of students success centered around the impact of parental involvement. When parents did not take an interest or



were pejorative and/or punitive of their children on the basis of academic performance, the children invariably were "unsuccessful" students. These "unsuccessful" students indicated that their parents were not helpful because they did not know English well enough to help them, and were always busy. The four students said that when they did not do well in school they received punishments most of the times.

Is there a relationship between Chinese parents' emphasis on education and students' academic performance? The results in this study showed that there was a strong relationship between Chinese parents' emphasis on education and students' academic performance.

Parents and family members seldom helped these
"unsuccessful" students by assisting them with homework, checking
homework, answering their questions, and attending teacher-parent
conferences. These parents did not buy there children books or
went to a library with them to get books related to their school
learning. The four students stated that they lacked family
support, especially emotional support. They often suffered
punishment related to their academic performance, and felt a
sense of futility toward the task of becoming a successful
students.

Conclusions

The findings of the study helped the authors to conclude that:

1. The English language is a main factor for Chinese



students academic performance; and it has a major influence on students' school learning. In addition, some Chinese students did not perform well because of lacking positive attitudes toward learning and toward acquisition of the English Language. These students reported less efforts toward the goal of acquiring English language proficiency.

2. The Chinese culture does have an impact on Chinese students in many ways. Chinese people, especially new immigrants, stick tightly to the Chinese language, culture and community, as a social and psychological string. In a review of the literature on cultural factors of Asian students, Caplan et al. (1992) stated that knowledge of one's culture does not occur in a vacuum; it is transmitted through the family. Children often acquire a sense of their heritage as a result of deliberate and concentrated parental effort in the context of family life. This inculcation of values from one generation to another is a universal feature of the conservation of culture. The essential variable in student success, for Chinese emigrants to the United States, centers around the impact of the immediate family upon the students. Interviews, essays, questionnaires, and the examination of graded materials each reiterated that the family environment, particularly that of the parent to child relationship, is an important component in the academic success or failure. The continuity of Chinese cultural norms being sustained and infused with American values, coupled with active involvement and the emotional support of parents, are critical



features for the academic success of students. If students home does not provide a supportive environment, then the school environment must be stimulation, supportive, and meaningful to be able to compensate for the lack of family support.

- 3. All parents placed school and education as a very important factor in the lives of their children. They care about their children's academic performance. However, these "unsuccessful" students' parents did not give enough time, and attention to their children, all of them said that they cared about their children's academic performance. These "unsuccessful" students and parents rationalized parent-teacher interaction as subordinate to work schedules. The students indicated lacking parental involvement in their homework no body provided them with emotional support and positive encouragement in times of academic difficulty.
- 4. Attitude of the parents towards school and academic achievement does help children to do better in school. Related theoretical literature indicated the existence of a relationship among language, cultural, and family factors and academic performance. The findings agreed with those of Schneider and Lee (1990) who stated that differences in language performance can be attributed to the fact that many of the Asian students are at a disadvantage because their parents did not speak English. This language factor may prevent some Asian parents from giving necessary assistance to their children in their academic performance. Family factors have a significant influence in the



academic performance of Asian students. As in Schneider and Lee's (1990) study showed that Asian parents have higher educational expectations and standards for their children. The children fill parental expectations because of certain cultural values and norms that related academic achievement to family honor. when these parent expectations are lacking, students are academically affected. The family has an important role in helping students succeed academically. Parents must create an environment that fosters self-esteem and an interest in learning. It is essential that parents get involved in their children's learning through providing appropriate books and learning materials, checking homework, answering questions, and providing a supportive emotional environment. Parents can help their children to form a study group after school, through contacting other Chinese students in the neighborhood to do homework together, to help each other with their study. One of our recommendations is that, in the bilingual program, the use of the English language as the medium of instruction should be gradually increased, especially in the content areas. Students should be expected to gradually increase competence in the English language. Language group activities in English should be formed more often in classrooms, and in extracurricular activities and mixed language group of students, especially English speaking students should be invited to join the group activities. In this way, all students will have more opportunities to practice the English language, and to learn more about American culture, as



well.

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